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ABSTRACT

A model for the evaluator-policy maker relationship is presented for use by those responsible for conducting program evaluations which ultimately affect policy decisions. In this collegial model, power is invested equally in relevant research and program personnel. Characteristics of the model are described in terms of: (1) early contact with the program; (2) willingness to learn about the program; (3) a consultive approach to evaluation design; (4) regular contact with the program; and (5) a formal mechanism for program personnel feedback. An application of this model is provided through a description of the American Bar Association BASICS Program. (Author/HLM)

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A MODEL FOR DEVELOPING PROGRAM EVALUATIONS TO INFLUENCE POLICY

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Psychologists, as well as other social scientists, are becoming increasingly involved in policy research. Following Campbell's (1969) plea for an experimental approach to reform, some social psychologists emerged from their methodological closets and began to apply their research skills to the evaluation of social reform programs. The profession of evaluation research has grown rapidly in the past few years, largely on the promise that psychologists and other evaluation researchers could provide data on program effects to policy-makers. The assumption was that policy-makers, once armed with conclusive data, would make more rational, better-informed decisions. Better knowledge would automatically, it seemed, result in better policy.

This result, alas, has not necessarily occurred. The fault has not been so much in the quality of the data evaluation researchers have collected (although new evaluation designs and new data-collection tools are still needed) but rather in the decisions made about which aspects of the program to research or about how and when to present the findings. These decisions arise from the relationship between the researchers and the policy-maker. It is my contention that a close and on-going relationship between researcher and program personnel of all types must occur if research results are to be relevant and timely, and hence, ready for utilization. I propose a collegial model for the evaluator-policy maker relationship, in contrast to others who do not encourage a close relationship (e.g., Michael Scriven, 1976). I would like to illustrate the model first by describing the evaluation of a nationwide correctional reform program which I have conducted over the past four years. Then, I will highlight components of the model, using examples from this research project.

The BASICS Program

In early 1974, the American Bar Association (ABA) began a new program in criminal justice reform. The program was developed by the ABA's Commission on Correctional Facilities and Services and was named BASICS, an acronym which stands for Bar Association Support to Improve Correctional Services. As the name implies, the BASICS Program was intended to improve correctional services using a new method: bar association involvement and work on local criminal justice problems. This novel method for effecting correctional reform was developed by the Staff Director of the ABA's Commission on Correctional Facilities and Services and by the Vice-President of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, which funded the new program. These men believed that lawyers and the bar associations of which they were members were untapped resources in the correctional reform area.

The BASICS plan, then, was to activate local bar association members first to plan (the "planning phase") and later to implement (the "action phase") some type of correctional reform effort. The project solicited applications from bar associations across the country for small planning grants of approximately $3000. From the approximately 1000 state, county and local bar associations across the country, BASICS received 106 applications and funded 80 planning projects in 40 states (Huff, Conner and Geis, 1975). After approximately three months of planning, 62 bar associations applied for larger grants up to $35,000 to implement their correctional reform efforts. Twenty "action" grants were awarded by the BASICS Program.

The BASICS Evaluation

Because of their interest in effecting "measurable changes," the BASICS Management Board and staff began to discuss program evaluation at the outset

of the Program. They asked our interdisciplinary team of evaluators (a social psychologist with an interest in evaluation research and a sociologist with an interest in criminology) to formulate an evaluation plan. The evaluation design had to conform to the Program's unusual operational procedure which involved a planning phase, during which bar associations formulated correctional reform plans, followed by an action phase, during which the associations were to implement their projects. The evaluation plan for the first phase involved a survey of funded and non-funded bar associations, interviews with a sample of funded associations, as well as interviews with the BASICS staff and Clark Foundation representatives. The product of this phase of the evaluation was a report to the Board of Directors containing data on the more and less successful aspects of the first phase and recommendations for the future (Huff, Conner and Geis, 1975).

The second phase of the project required a different evaluation plan. Because 20 bar associations were funded to implement 20 different kinds of evaluations projects, no single evaluation design would suit all projects. Instead, the BASICS Management Board, staff and research team jointly selected four projects for intensive evaluation. These four were selected primarily because the interventions had the potential to be modeled by other bar projects. The four projects were a prison legal services and paralegal training project in Michigan (Conner, Emshoff and Davidson, 1978), a citizen dispute settlement program in Florida (Conner and Surette, 1977), a jail legal services project in Maryland (Huff, 1978) and an offender vocational training project, also in Maryland (Huff, 1978). Each member of the research team worked closely with two reform projects to develop and implement an appropriate evaluation plan. The designs selected ranged from a control-group study to an

intensive interviewing strategy. This second phase of the BASICS evaluation project has just ended.

The Collegial Model of the Evaluator-Program Relationship

At both the macro policy-making level, with the Board of Directors and the Program manager, and at the micro policy-making level, with directors of the four individual programs, we used the same approach to the evaluator-program relationship: a collegial, cooperative model. These activities characterized our approach: (1) we began to work with the program personnel before the program began; (2) we quickly learned as much as we could about the program and kept learning throughout the course of the research; (3) we planned the research with the program personnel's help; (4) we thoroughly presented and discussed our final evaluation design, measures and time-table with the program personnel; (5) we maintained regular contact with the program, in two cases hiring evaluation research assistants who maintained almost daily contact; and (6), as promised at the outset of the research, we presented the program personnel with drafts of our reports for their comments, which were included with the final, published report.

The collegial model of the evaluator-program relationship, then, is characterized by (1) *early contact* with the program, ideally prior to the start of the program; (2) a *willingness to learn* about the program and keep learning as the program is implemented; (3) a *consultive approach to evaluation design*, where the evaluator has full and final responsibility for designing the study, choosing the measures and setting the timetable but does so with the advice of the program personnel; (4) *regular contact*, ideally in person, with the program; and (5) a formal *mechanism for program personnel feedback* on the evaluation results.

The personal styles of the two evaluation researchers was also important. Both of us had been involved in social reform work (one of us was in the Peace Corps and the other was a social worker), so we could understand the program personnels' concerns. In addition, we believe there was a mutual respect for the different skills each of us--evaluators and program personnel alike--brought to the program and the different tasks each had to accomplish. Rather than highlight our differences from the program personnel, we as researchers instead tried to maximize the similarities and to take actions to minimize the differences where this was feasible (e.g., learning about the program, the community, the staff, the directors; spending time experiencing day-to-day activities of the program).

It is worthwhile questioning whether this collegial model we followed was really the cause of the cooperative relationship we experienced. Perhaps the approach was not the causal factor: this just might have been one of those rare instances where--by chance--all worked for the best. Several things would lead us to doubt this. First, in the five evaluator-program personnel relationships, there were degrees of cooperativeness. In those cases where we experienced our best relationship, the six activities noted above were carried out without exception. Where we were not able to implement all of these activities, the evaluator-program relationship was less satisfactory. Second, the reasons for the inability to implement the activities fully were attributable more to the evaluators than to the program. For example, one of us was unable to maintain close contact with a project due to an illness, and this affected the evaluation. Third, these were different kinds of projects involving different kinds of people. Yet, we generally were able to implement our evaluation plan in spite of these differences.

We believe, then, that the collegial model we followed resulted in the cooperative relationships we experienced. In fact, in all five instances, the relationship had a synergistic quality--improving the content of the program as well as of the conduct of the evaluation. The improvement of the content of the programs occurred, first, via formative evaluation results and discussions, then later, via the summative evaluation results. At the national level, our results on the planning phase affected the content and direction of the action phase. At the local level, the conduct of the evaluation was improved because the program directors aided in the implementation of the evaluation, thereby helping raise client participation. There was one additional unintended effect which we were pleased to note: after we were no longer associated with the individual projects, two of the four project directors implemented the same research plan for a second year (including, in one case, a control-group research design) because of the utility of the data they received at the end of the first year. This kind of unobtrusive measure of satisfaction with the research provides additional support for a collegial evaluator-program relationship, as well as a concrete indication that the bridge between the researchers and the program personnel had been established.

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